

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT MRSA

For Inmates

What is MRSA?

MRSA stands for “methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*.” MRSA is a kind of *Staphylococcus aureus* (“staph”) bacteria that is resistant to (unable to be treated by) some antibiotics.

Many people think that MRSA is a “super bug” that causes severe disease. It is true that sometimes MRSA can cause severe disease, but many staph can cause severe disease. The difference is that MRSA needs to be specifically identified and treated with different medication. With the right treatment, MRSA can be treated successfully.

MRSA is a kind of *Staphylococcus aureus* (“staph”) bacteria that is resistant to some kinds of antibiotics.

What are the symptoms of an infection caused by MRSA?

Pimples, rashes, pus-filled boils, especially when warm, painful, red or swollen, can mean that you have a staph skin infection, possibly a MRSA infection. The only way to tell the difference between MRSA and other staph infections is with lab tests.

Ask to see the healthcare staff if you have a skin infection. They will decide what treatment is necessary, if any.

How are MRSA infections treated?

Most MRSA infections are treated by good wound and skin care: keeping the area clean and dry, washing your hands after caring for the area, carefully disposing of any bandages, and allowing your body to heal.

Sometimes treatment requires antibiotics. If antibiotics are needed, it is important to use the medication as directed unless a healthcare staff member tells you to stop. If the infection has not improved within a few days after seeing the healthcare staff, ask to contact the healthcare staff again.

Is MRSA a problem in correctional facilities?

Not necessarily in all facilities. Many people, including inmates and corrections officers, carry staph (including MRSA) in their nose or on their skin and do not know they are carrying it. They do not get skin infections. They do not have any signs or symptoms of illness.

However, some conditions can lead to MRSA/staph infections in prisons and jails (see below) and in other settings where people have a lot of direct contact and skin damage can occur, like sports teams.

What can lead to a MRSA/staph infection in a prison or jail?

- 1) **Direct contact:** *To get a MRSA or other staph infection, you first must get the bacteria on your skin or in your nose.* Staph, including MRSA, are spread by direct skin-to-skin contact. In correctional facilities, there may be regular, frequent direct contact among inmates and correctional officers. For example, when one person shakes hands with another, tackles or wrestles with another person, gets “patted down”, or has some other direct contact with the skin of another person, staph can be passed from one person to another. This happens in any situation where there is direct contact, not just in jails or prisons.

Staph can also spread by contact with items that have been used by people with staph on their skin, like towels, or athletic equipment shared in the gym.

- 2) **Lack of handwashing:** The best way to prevent skin infections, and many other infections, is to wash your hands frequently. MRSA and other staph can be removed from your hands by washing with soap and water. Daily showering is helpful to remove bacteria from the skin. Wearing shower shoes can protect your feet from bacteria and fungi as well.
- 3) **Cuts and scrapes:** To cause infection, MRSA and other staph need to get into the skin. This can happen through a scrape, scratch, or wound. MRSA can also enter the body when non-sterile equipment is used in body piercing and tattooing.
- 4) **Dealing with infections:** People with MRSA and other staph skin infections – especially boils or wounds that are swollen and have pus – can most easily spread staph to others. Skin infections should be taken seriously. Ask to see the healthcare staff if you have one.

What about family and friends outside the prison or jail?

It is normal to be concerned about spreading MRSA and other staph to family and friends outside the jail or prison. However, your family and friends do not have a greater chance of getting MRSA or other staph infections from you just because you live in a correctional facility. There are many ways to reduce the risk of spreading MRSA and other staph, starting with frequent handwashing. See additional prevention steps below.

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How can MRSA be prevented and controlled in correctional facilities?

- Practice good hand hygiene. Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 15-30 seconds.
- Take care of your skin and any cuts or scratches. If you notice any lumps, bumps or lesions, never try to open them yourself. Always ask the healthcare staff to look at it as soon as possible.
- Avoid getting dry skin. Dry skin can crack and make an infection more likely.
- Do not share personal items such as towels, razors, and toothbrushes.
- Cover damaged skin (cuts, scrapes and scratches) and draining wounds with bandages.
- Carefully dispose of bandages containing pus or blood.
- Shower regularly with soap and warm water.
- Use a barrier (shirt and pants) between your skin and equipment that is shared with others, like exercise equipment in the gym.
- Request to see the healthcare staff if you think you have a skin infection.

The best way to prevent MRSA infections, and many other infections, is to wash your hands frequently.

**For more information about MRSA,
visit the MDPH website at www.mass.gov/dph**

